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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Original Poetry

THE NORTHERN STRANGER

by

Lysander Schaffer Kemp, Jr.

(A.B., Bates College, 1942)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

1946

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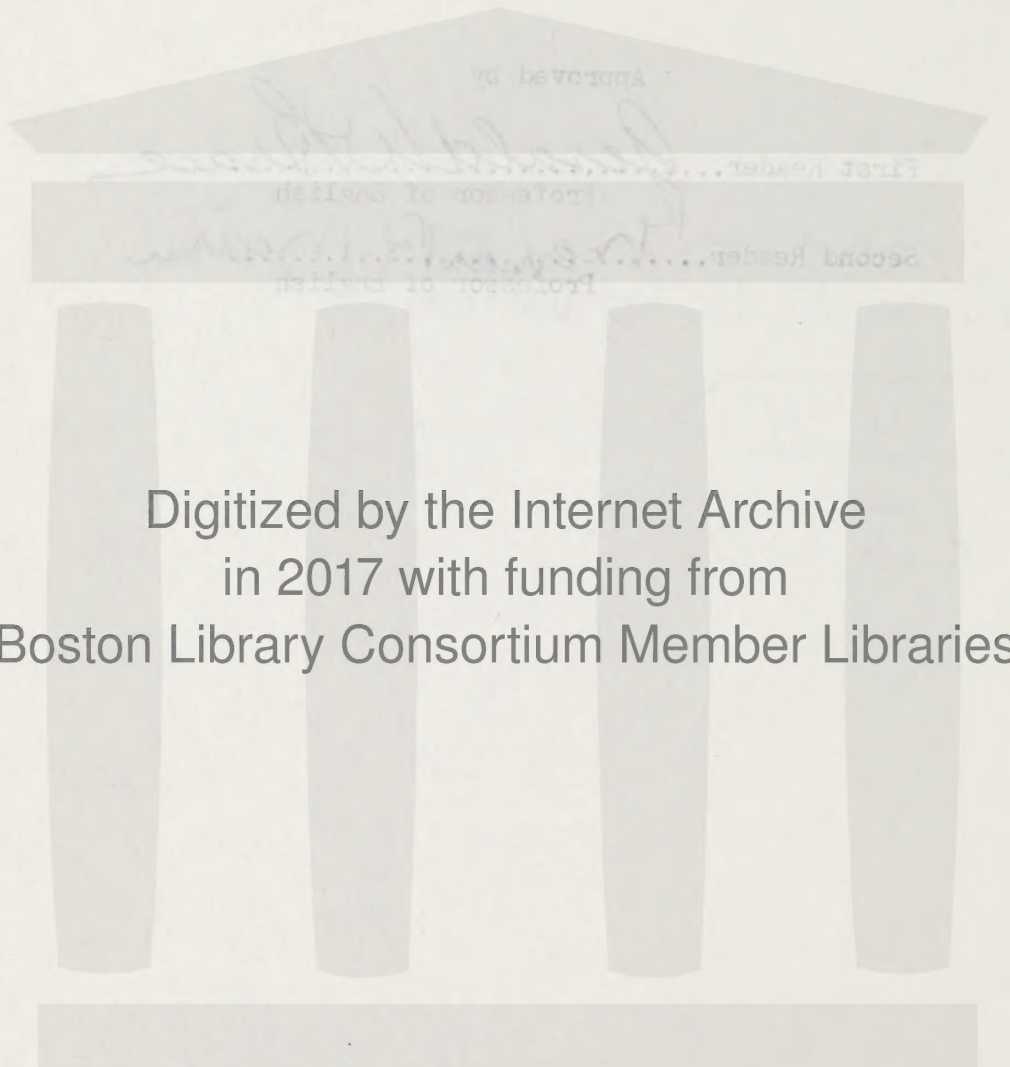
First Reader.....

Professor of English

Second Reader.....

Professor of English

Lyons, G. J., Jr.
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NOTE

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Lysander S. Kemp, Jr.
14 May 1946

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GOOD NEIGHBOR

Now who will seek and winningly befriend
such arrogance out of the jungle?
Open the taut lips and the tribal mind?
Who will unbend and how will he unbend
to neighborly ways the body that slides in shadow
lightly like a column of mist or a ghost,
but fronts the northern stranger stiff as a post?

And who will seek and somehow coax from sleep
the destitute in the alley?
He sags in a doorway under a giant hat
with knees on chest and head on knees in a heap.
Who from our easy cities will come to his crumbling
tragic city and stand him straight and strong,
from love and goodness of heart, for nothing, a song?

CHAPTER OF LA LIBERTAD

In the first road of the dirty town, the little
stranger — THE NORTHERN STRANGER — walks,
walking and not walking perfectly at ease
amongst the huge feet and polished sandals.
Everyone, it seems, walks hereafter in that town,
the rich, the poor, the cripple, the lame, all
simultaneously barefoot; all but the tall American
soldier striding in glittering shoes, who says
"These people are no good."

But what they desire
he is without. He walks in shoes, but they call
him in derision, dignified but overbearing.
His uniform is bayoneted but they were poverty,
not like them but death to death.
He walks now and when he will walk we laugh,
but their faces are not twisted, are beautifully calm
with calm, calm, the dark gold of the Indian.

FASHIONS OF LA LIBERTAD

In the dirt road of the dirty town, the little
Ecuadorian soldiers march without shoes,
untidy and sad but oh perfectly at home
amongst the dogs and fowl and potbellied children.
Everyone, it seems, walks barefoot in that town,
the peón, the crone, the cripple, the mother, all
shamelessly barefoot; all but the tall American
soldier striding in glittering shoes, who says
"These people are no good."

But what they possess
he is without. He walks in shoes, but they walk
shod in despair, unpolished but everlasting.

His uniform is handsome but they were poverty,
not trim like khaki but durable to death.

He smiles now and soon he will scowl or laugh,
but their faces are not twisted, are beautifully calm
with dolór, dolór, the dark grief of the Indian.

ADMONITION

Plume of flesh, pluma de carne, shaken
 in the night, in the day's light, in today's weather—
 happy to stride to sing, I am mistaken
 to forget with all my heart that I am a feather
 of blood and skin on a flimsy quill of bones.
 I stride among cripples, blind to a brother shape
 wrenched into accusation, deaf to the moans
 of importuning, the machete-word of hate.
 I sing among beggars, "chiu chiu" in slums
 like untended graveyards, "chiu chiu" to dead
 faces blankly peeping from crooked tombs,
 to Pablo, asleep in the street, who has no bed.

Pluma de carne, feather of flesh among feathers,
 sing but remember, stride but remember your brothers.

THE SPEECH OF THE GENERAL

People of this land, the starving, the dog-tired,
you that are poor, impoverished, penniless, come—
I give you seven acres of fertile nothing,
seven to every family, my pitiful people,
because I love you.

Come my ulcerous festering cancered leprous
consumptive paralyzed club-footed syphilitic
people—I give you a warm bowl of nothing,
three times every day and free for the asking,
because I love you.

Soldiers and beggars, farmers and workers and cripples,
clerks and laborers, pimps and peddlers and poets,
come along, come and vote, I give you the splendid
chance to say nothing to your hearts' complete content,
because I love you.

Come to a new communion—your holy blood
shall turn to gold, the blessed sweat of your limbs
to a simple hacienda. You know I am humble,
detesting speeches. I cry to you now only
because I love you.

ON A WALL IN PUERTO RICO

For Narciso Dobal

Here is a chemist's work, garish and rude,
painted with pure colors and unmixed anguish:
A heavy tragic figure slumps on a shattered
column, the man is twisting, face in hands;
a woman sags in the door of a mountain shack,
looking out at nothing—the line of the leaning
arms is simple despair, or it is defiant,
as if to break the frame down and break free.
Under the painting are five Disasters of War.
Together a little chemist and Goya speak,
superbly or not but the voice is nothing, the words
and why the words are spoken, this is all.
They speak of war's disasters, disasters of peace,
indelicate talk, and we can take heart: the breath
fails in a throat but another man stands up
and speaks, crudely or neatly, as he is able.
If the words are ever lost, if nobody says them,
that is the end. That is goodnight, and the night.

A POSTCARD FOR RUTH

If the derisive music sweetens
 and the fierce eyes turn to buttons,
 if the outrageous mocking snigger
 chokes to apologetic giggles,
 and the sharp lines go fuzzy, and anger
 simpers and protest snaps its fingers—
 summon me, please, and we shall meet to carve
 our headstones chip and chop, and dig our graves.
 But there in San Juan is the frightful warning section
 of stilted rickety shacks constructed of rubbish
 above polluted water and stinking flats.
 Its name is not The Mad, it is El Purgatorio—
 the Little Mad...when I first heard it, I shuddered
 at the tragic laugh in the diminutive of affliction.
 Never go in, you will not come out of it happy.
 Never come here, never go down to Mexico,
 keep to your aunt house if you want to keep happy.
 All views are nullified at the end by something awful,
 by little children wading in sewage water.
 Too bad—but even in Paradise, I am told,
 the faucet running with hot honey leaks,
 drip drip drip all night, and they call the plumber,
 but he never comes out of his golden bed.

SCENERY FOR A NICE LADY

Out of Gurabo, northward up from the plaza,
 San Justo Road goes up and over the hills,
 beautiful all the way—views of the valley,
 the ploughed patches, the lavender-blooming cane,
 the river sweetly repeating its easy turns.
 Beyond the gap is the grand view to San Juan,
 to the harbor, the haze of the sea, and the blue sea.

But there in San Juan is the frightful swarming section
 of stilted rickety shacks constructed of rubbish
 above polluted water and stinking flats.

Its name is not The Mud, it is El Fanguito—
 The Little Mud...when I first heard it, I winced
 at the tragic laugh in the diminutive of affection.
 Never go in, you will not come out of it happy.
 Never come here, never go down to Boston,
 keep to your neat house if you want to keep happy.
 All views are spoilt at the end by something awful,
 by little children wading in sewage water.

Too bad—but even in Paradise, I am told,
 the faucet running milk and honey leaks,
 drip drip drip all night, and they call the plumber,
 but he never rouses out of his golden bed.

THE FAULTY HAG

(El Fanguito Slums, Puerto Rico)

Passing the slums, the tragedies in doorways,
he glanced at his nails or nothing and praised the sun.
No pity, dismay, not even disgust; his look
was calm as a cow's. Why, damn him, why?
The motion pictures taught him the torn enchantment
is patched as good as new, he learned from the comics
the hearts of the poor are made of gold and fun.
Why was he not piteous, why not astounded?
Because the scene was dreary and too dirty,
with no imaginable happy ending, or not
American through and through nor in technicolor?
He thought that El Fanguito was not real?
True, in the pictures that hag limping through mud
with a mad stare would croon or bake a cake...
or might at least look up, and smile for the soldiers.

LANDSCAPE, PUERTO RICO

The mist concealing the hills is grey and steady,
soft to the look but the look cannot enter;
the hand can enter but touches nothing. The mist
is mist—I say it in plain English, the white man's
language—here in the valley in the damp morning.

Plain and true...but the smoke is true also.
The smoke of this landscape fumes from the long burning
of shoes Rosita never owned, of the sweat
as hot as tears of Carlos Quiñones ploughing
his perpendicular slope. It fumes from the deep
guitar of Juan del Valle, the smoke of grief
with the song of grief more like a wail than a song,
hopelessly rising there in the tragic hills.

The sun will dissolve the mist, but sun will not clear
this air (O what will ever clear this air?)
of despair, the pitiful smoke, the bitter burning.

FANTASTIC CONVERSATION

Puerto Rico

—Who is it walking behind me?

—Nothing, Señor...

the night mist in the figure of a drunkard.

—Who is it speaking? I hear somebody speaking.

—Nobody, Señor, nobody...only a trace

of shadow in the figure of a nobody,

or else a nobody in the figure of a shadow,

traipsing you down the road. Why do you tremble?

I am nothing. I am the mountain wind.

The bamboos creak like a stair in a haunted house,

but trees are not assassins. Easy, Señor.

—I tremble at night. In sunlight the various slopes
delight me like Vermont, but the dark upsets me.

I was a brave boy in the dark. I never

shied on the road in the robber-hiding wood,

or screamed at hobgoblins cackling in the closet;

now I walk quickly and talk to nothing. And lately

I dreamed I strolled at dawn by a tiled canal

and a peg-legged whiskery sea-faring idiot fellow

put out to sea in a crazy peach-basket boat,

hoisting a painted sail, bearing up-current,

chanting obscenely to a trim ballet of dolphins.

A shabby girl said, "He is our one salvation."

—A bad dream, Señor. Why did she say that?

—God knows. And I dream of a silly old man dying
in a dark room. At first he grins like mad,
but the grin loosens and fails and the eyes lid,
the body assuming the secrecy of defunction;
then out of the body, floating up and shaking
in the dim air in a rapid exuberancy
of bird-song, a miniature of the body shines
a firefly green, smiling, blessedly smiling,
and drifts through the pane and streams away to the moon
like a green comet, announcing a new cadaver.

The shabby girl says, "He was our one salvation."

—A bad dream, Señor.

—Something is wrong...
myself or my world or the world and I together.

—I chop the cane with an old machete, Señor,
in the valley fields of a stranger, for little money.

We live in a tin hut on the next hill up,
my wife, my seven children, my coughing father.
Something is wrong, American.

—Something is wrong
with your world and mine and the whole world.

I envied the happy savage once, perceiving
none but honest animal wrongs; but then,
in a certain wind on the Isthmus, I lay awake
hearing a drum in the jungle under the hill,
a slack dreary thudding...it was the savage,

unable to comprehend and afraid to accept
 the northern ways and magic, calling without hope
 to his own desolate and uncomprehending people.
 Something wrong.

—Where could I go, American?
 Where is it good?

—Something is wrong in my country.
 If the white bones and red flesh wear a black
 skin...

—My boy is a soldier. The Colonel says
 my boy is black, my brother's boy is white.
 They are good sons. What is black and white,
 American?

—Nothing: tell your boy it is wrong,
 but tell him to hold his tongue and take it standing;
 he can do nothing, but tell him he will have friends.
 ...Too, if the mathematician drinks...if the grocer
 suggests a liberal doubt...wrongs in my country,
 here, and the few countries I know. Felipe,
 Carlos...what is your name?...I thought it was good
 here on the island: Cabiya said it was good.
 We flew across water in misted morning light
 and down a swampy coast to Curaçao;
 then over the city, and slanting off to the north,
 over the crinkling whitecap-speckled sea
 at such a height we shivered and clapped our hands;
 then finally over the patterns in green and beige,
 and the hills in russet and green, of Puerto Rico,

and the columns of cloud standing up on your land.

—But something is wrong, Señor. What can I do?

—Pray for a dragon to shamble out of the sea

and gobble the tyrannous. Pray for a unicorn

to stab its magical purifying spike

in the dirty fount of the minds of the world's people.

Pablo, Miguel...amigo...I think we can only

try and hope. And maybe we can do nothing,

nothing at all, nothing whatever, nothing

for trying, nothing but nothing...sometimes I think so.

—I know the word 'nothing,' Señor. Is that all?

—Maybe. Maybe a little. Work and hope.

—I work.

—Maybe a little...little by little.

—Poco a poco. I say in the field, "Nothing."

I say in the night, happy with rum, "A little"...

Now I see the lights of Gurabo. Shadows

live on the hill, Señor. I must go home.

—Maybe nothing...but maybe a little. Goodnight.

—Buenos noches, hermano.

—Goodnight, brother.

LA CADENA VERDE

A Painting by José Torres Martinó, Puerto Rico

He stands with his back against the standing cane,
right hand clutching a green chain and left hand
poised at his shoulder clutching the trim machete.
This is the final instant of his decision,
but the story is all here: the young cane-cutter
now perceiving the green links of necessity
lying across his feet like an anaconda.
That snaky chain will squeeze his life out early
(sugar is white...how can it not be red?),
and the cane-knife is up. But there is no ending now,
this year or next. The man will strike, or not,
but whether to cut the chain is whether to live
in rural or city destitution, is whether
to run from country anguish to grief in the gutters.
Oh it is horribly vain, it is equally futile,
whether he cuts, or sprawls in the hot field weeping.

IN OUR TIME

Violence colder, sharper, rarer,
—IN MY TIME
A colder hatred, sought the cry
"Good as war in our time, O Lord!"
And it makes whole and whole a million
And it makes the whole and whole a million

Here is a wicked great old man
We said, we thought, and loudly praised
That what he said he thought was true.
Years on the side of the great,
Of the fool surely and crazy Jane
And we said of him that fierce and old and true,
That Chamberlain, old and, saying proper
And we said of him that fierce and old and true,
"A better," we said, "that give his time,"
And he showed us with his hand,
He fed all Europe into the shop.
"Peace in our time," he said as smooth as silk.

IN OUR TIME

Violent codger superbly ranting,
proud of his passions, old Yeats implored
a crazier hatred, caught the cry
"Send us war in our time, O Lord!"
cried it makes whole and hale a wanting
mind and it skins the cataracted eye.

Here is a wicked great old man
we said, and clucked, and loudly praised
that what he said he thought was true.
Yeats was on the side of the crazed,
of the Fool surely and Crazy Jane
and somewhat of him most fierce and his Nazi crew.

And Chamberlain, mildewed, waving proper
symbol-umbrellas or walking-sticks:

"A bumbler," we said, "but give him time."

And he dickered smoothly with lunatics,
he fed all Europe into the chopper.

"Peace in our time," he lisped as smooth as slime.

WORDS FOR THE FUNERAL OF MUSSOLINI

Sir, we blush, Sir, we convulse with shame,
that you hang here by the feet like a dead hog.
We hurried, forgive us, that was unseemly, forgetting
to string you up correctly, Sir, by the neck.
But nothing can spoil your finest hour, your people
about you, showing their love and tongues, showering
your corpse with flowers of spittle, saluting with boots.
And here is the coffin lined with shavings, perfect
for one so grand who died without ostentation.
Sir, the people are waiting, farewell, but first
permit me to place on your bare breathless chest
a wreath. I fear it is ugly (you killed the flowers—
but not without cause, we know, and a fair trial),
but here is the wreath (such as it is), of cabbage
and wigs and dead toads, and bandages intertwining,
and R. I. P. spelled out with snouts of jackals.
(I fear it smells.) Farewell.

Take him away.

THE DISSEMBLER

Subtle destruction wholly delights her mind:
with girl-bright eyes she riddles how to destroy
her slacking lover with glances sweet and kind,
with sleeking hands, a mimicry of joy
and love, so neatly done but oh untrue!

—If I were a bombardier crouched above Munich
remembering Grandsire remembering German brew
and German tunes and blossoms, I might be sick...
then subtle aim, cry "Jesus!" cry "Bombs away!"—

But in the act she knows her plot too savage,
and gives it over in tears and true dismay,
in truest love: she has the choice, being free.
So Love and War, though one in an old adage,
have at the worst this dear disparity.

TRANSPORT TO ECUADOR

Leaving Balboa, the little gulls and the filthy water,
passing green hill-islands, passed into the slick Pacific.

Once I should have cried denial
that I could voyage off in no ecstasy,
with no more thought and joy than when I rode
the poky train from Boston to Canton Junction.

But we ignored the blue bulging,
the dolphins arching over and curving under,
the fish that skim like a boy's glider:
for we must discover the drinking-fountain
and ask a sailor How is the food? Rotten? and learn
to walk like sailors the out-of-kiltering deck.

We ignored the Galapagos
(incredibly barren, the waste brown islands):
for Hugo, he vilified New England.
And we had crossed the Equator without knowing it.

At night we bedded on the cool deck
rolled into our blankets and feet bumping heads,
and talked of home a little, and slept tight:
scarcely glancing into the sky
at the tropic stars enormous and legendary
over the sea's rolling sibilant intricate surface.

REVEILLE HERE AND NOW

The palm by the door cleanly green because near,
 the palms across the drill-field smoky blue,
 and only the peaks of the tall hills up clear,
 the flanks and foothills hid by a wall of haze—
 that is the way a day begins, all new
 and clearing to green, here in our valley days.
 I stand at attention waiting to answer Here!
 but my glance goes to the palms, the soft bamboos
 enhancing the river, the mighty feather curled
 around The Anvil; sweetly these appear.
 There is no looking ahead, I must not lose
 a morning look at this green surrounded world,
 a palm hiding no sniper, hills where the sound
 of thunder brings rain, not the heart's blood, to the ground.
 no wonder. They pass, and vanish without a trace.
 This real but resting world is too vivid to face,
 too bright for a tired head...
 For where we are going is there
 in invisible barracks the stationary bed
 is a void of simple slumber. The half dead
 are the strong and empty here.
 We look, as if counting sheep.

SIMPLE SLUMBER

The car's flaring light
 creates a moving microcosm, a world
 we approach always but cannot enter, swirled
 in the black of country night.

The mongrel poised in the grass,
 now blind as a stone and changed to stone by fright,
 has precious stones for eyes; to left and right
 the trees loom and pass,

the double dazzles race
 from the dark, the twin procession streams alas
 like specters out of the black wall or morass
 or gulf of outer space.

But we are moved to no dread,
 no wonder. They pass, and vanish without a trace.
 This real but racing world is too vivid to face,
 too bright for a tired head...

For where we are going is where
 in immobile barracks the stationary bed
 is a void of simple slumber. The half dead
 can lie steady and empty there.

We look, as if counting sheep,

at the flashing marvels, the cur's diamantine stare,
 the stream of phantom trees. We are bored to despair.
 We want the nothing of sleep.

THE BELL

The bells of Oaxaca ring the quarter hour
 all day and half the night, or all perhaps—
 they ring, and a shalwar bangle in a cool wind,
 and perhaps they tolled for me, but I was sleeping.
 I woke to the bells and saw sun on clouds and a boy
 proclaiming oranges under my glass window,
 my sleep was spoiled, but the boy's cry was sweet
 as the sweet fruit he cried, answered to the break
 broken get-up-in-the-morning bustle. I rose,
 washed and ate, and sat on a glass bench
 under the dome of a green symmetrical tree,
 watching the sun, the girls, the gleaming church—
 the door is Corinthian, I think the towers are French,
 but the church is Spanish and right and fine to admire,
 and the bells all morning ring the quarter hour.

So what? No what have I said, or what am I saying?
 The lines come without labor, saying nothing,
 saying a peevish note no, I sat in the place,
 Oaxaca is nice in the sun, behind my window,
 would in the glass lines and remembered laughter,
 there is a flower with, I wish for peace
 more than I wish for anything before.

WISHING POEM

Puerto Rico

The bells of Guayama ring the quarter hour
 all day and half the night, or all perhaps—
 they rang, and a shutter banged in a cool wind,
 and perhaps they tolled for me, but I was sleeping.
 I woke to the bells and the sun up clear and a boy
 proclaiming oranges under my plaza window.
 My sleep was spoiled, but the boy's cry was sweet
 as the sweet fruit he cried, compared to the brash
 brazen get-up-in-the-morning bugle. I rose,
 washed and ate, and sat on a plaza bench
 under the dome of a green symmetrical tree,
 admiring the sun, the girls, the gleaming church—
 its door is Corinthian, I think the towers are French,
 but the church is Spanish and right and fine to admire,
 and the bells all morning rang the quarter hour.

So what? So what have I said, so what am I saying?
 The lines come without labor, saying nothing,
 saying a peddler woke me, I sat in the plaza,
 Guayama is nice in the sun. Behind or under,
 unsaid in the slack lines and remembered languor,
 there is a fierce wish. I wish for peace
 more than I wished for anything before,

more than I guessed that I could wish for anything.
Almost, I pray for peace. I am a soldier
who has fired only at paper, and bled only
when shaving with salt water. Yet I can wish
Peace for men who fight for peace and hardly
recall it, peace for children who have not known it,
peace on earth; I wish it so, it half
seems wrong to want so calm a thing so fiercely.
No, wishing takes no towns—but the wish now
can afterwards be love. Now wish for peace,
and when it is ours at last, it must be loved.
We know how it is taken while we sleep;
the haggard boy could tell us, if he had time,
how dirty sleeplessly hard it is to recover.
Love it for keeps. Guard and love. Be a lover.

ECLOGUE

After the music was tried and shot, the vow
 hanged by the neck, the skeleton starved, the shawl
 of the mother clubbed in the yard...there is peace now.

In Dadian a dead day reflects the air.

In the ruined hour of the destroyed afternoon,
 the year of the bombing, Peace from a splintered wall
 of the shattered city tootles her sweet tune.

These years were for peace, and they will all

The sweet child at her feet is laughing. He plays
 with his toys—a twisted joy, his toes, a doll,

a bullet, and all his broken coming days.

and bullets for you and the hunter's son and John

and play of bullets for old Jack O'Connell and all

and a small bullet for the small boy who lay on the lawn.

We paid for peace, but it is too simply taken.

So I will keep all my portraits safe and sound,

always in mind, and not yet forget the swirling

space in the air, the day dead on the ground.

AFTER

Snow, and the train is late. The grinning doctor
smoothens his famous pewter-colored smooth hair.
The tidal wave ascends. A door is shut.
In Dedham a dead dog putrefies the air.

Why can I see presentiments of dismay,
omens of rage and disaster? Now I have paid
three young years for peace, and many paid all.
It is ours now, but I fear I am still afraid—

For there was a bullet made and meant for me
and bullets for you and the dentist's son and John
and plenty of bullets for old Aunt Grace and all
and a small bullet for the small dog asleep on the lawn.

We paid for peace, but it is too simply broken.
So I will keep all my portents safe and sound,
always in mind, and not yet forget the warning
snow in the air, the dog dead on the ground.

GUAYMAS
December, 1943

—A HEADFUL OF SCENES

The scene of the scene of the scene of the scene,
Indigo children looking over the scene,
The blue-bay scene, the blue-bay scene,
It was a dream scene. But the scene was faded,
Imagined scene of the scene, I saw the scene,
By streetlight, the scene of the scene and scene,
Scene of the scene and scene of the scene,
I had the scene of the scene in the scene,
By daylight, then, but every scene and scene
Of the scene and scene of the scene,
The scene of the scene was scene and scene,
I saw the scene of the scene and scene of the scene,
In the scene of the scene I saw the scene,
Scene of the scene and scene of the scene.

GUAYAQUIL

Ecuador, 1943

The scraggly fields and cattle staunch on the tracks,
 lolligag children hawking beer and papaya,
 the bone-bag curs, the vulture-gargoyled shacks:
 it was a drear approach. But the city was fabled;
 imagining quaint splendors, I crossed the Guayas.

By streetlight, the florid porticoes and fronts,
 where toughs and putas lurked, were standing rubble;
 I dodged convulsive drunks in bamboo slums.
 By daylight, then. But every street was the haunt
 of sleek dudes and tender diligent pimps,
 the grandiose façades were defiled and acrumble,
 I strode among beggars who flaunt their shocking limbs.

In Rocafuerte Park I drooped to a bench,
 darkly and peevishly rhyming wench and stench.

MEMENTO OF GUAYAQUIL

1945

It is a queer city, in a queer country. Nothing is middling, as in New England. Buildings are stone, flowery and huge, or else of split bamboo. Where lawny suburbs ought to be, it is slums.

From the door of the huge stone hotel, a blond American soldier in plain sight for gawking, but gawking back, I watched the man of affairs, the dude, the lady, pass in their fine clothing, the peón in pants and sweat. I heard the click of better people pattering by in their shoes, and under, the barefoot primitive soft padding, jungle feet on cobbles, the ocelot step.

Nothing was halfway, nothing I found was middling, as in New England; it was all weeds or all clover.

And thinking "Here some are so well-to-do and the poor pitiable poor so poor," and thinking "Here I am halfway in between and glad to walk in the middle (born and brought up to walk there)," I joined to Guayaquil staring up or down, to Guayaquil pattering or lightly padding by, my middling look, my weedy foot and clover.

FIRST VIEW

Here is Gurabo, dirty-pale in the sun,
here is the beggar, the pimp, the cripple; and look,
here comes mad Ramon, lashing his cane
at the bony mongrel doting in his wake.

But there is the road out up to high ground,
rising and looping in and out of the line
of broken slopes, the hills always unowned
except by the lonely, never by us, by Spain.

There you can look away off and breathe clean
and speak as clear as water and stand up tall;
there in the tilting patterns of earth and green
a man can shut his mouth and sit still.

SAN JUAN

A Décima

There was Cuba to port, Florida to starboard,

and Here are Spanish seas, all in the east,

Felipe said, and was King,

and the vast escarpments ring

the city. Maria y Luis

in a lopsided heart, these

are not the King's endeavor.

But walls he ordered never

to fall, they chip, and fall

to time; the bashful scrawl,

it is for ever and ever.

Two days ago never blossoms into a rose

unless they rise in every living day...

my eyes were withdrawn, but it was only looking.

I rode the box back with a handful of stones

and a heavy heart from knowing I was blind;

and there was Florida to port, Cuba to starboard,

and Felipe also dead ahead in the sun.

A HEADFUL OF SCENES

There was Culebra to port, Vieques to starboard,
and dead ahead, St. Thomas tall in the haze.
I rode the bow in sun, from Puerto Rico
between two islands, dreaming to write a poem
of scapes and glimpses in full color, ending
again on an old theme. And yes indeed,
I saw the vermillion roofs and storybook buildings
up and down the hillside, all as promised,
the Danish fort, the flamboyant tree, the black
lank-legged girls.

But this was not enough;
two days can never blossom into a poem
unless they root in every living day...
my eyes were entranced, but it was only looking.
I rode the bow back with a headful of scenes
and a heavy heart from knowing I was blind;
and there was Vieques to port, Culebra to starboard,
and Puerto Rico dead ahead in the sun.

GUARACHA

Bewildered by strange music, the shake
of dark dancers in a strange rhythm,
the dark boy singing his passion out,
"Yo te quiero" from the big throat
immediately, beyond mistake—
bewildered, uneasy, scratching a thumb,
I saw your sungold hair and tall
splendor and straighter northern grace
on the wagon-road under the mountain,
on the wide porch, in the daisy field—
but not here, not twisting in this place;
and suddenly I was sick for home.

HOW TO GO HOME

To know your native place and proper home
(the house on the dune above the glittering bay),
its tug on your heart, its full felicity, roam
(but remember the girl sea-streaming, leaning and laughing
as she ran up the tilt of the tawny shore);
and then go back easily, go back simply,
as though you had only walked to the corner store.

A FEW NOSTALGIC LINES

Here I can see in a green circle the rough
 or feminine shapes of the hills around Caguas,
 remember the white swan-breasted Maine hills
 and the Paris-green bonbon peaks of Panama,
 yes, and picture, beyond the trough of Stone City,
 the splendid running-away immobile sea-swell
 of Iowa hills, with the spherical trees for bubbles.

But what I want for hills—my taste is plain
 and homesick lately—are dunes, the little barren
 dunes of Cape Cod even the toad can climb.

REMEMBERING CAPE COD

Here on a crest in Panama, the body
 is cooped in walls of green, of locking leaves
 that flourish and die together the full year.
 Mind flies out; it sees and hears to northward
 a rapid leaning wave collapse and spill
 to a crumple, a soft roil of rubble and bubbles
 and sandy brine ascending the sleek rise—
 water music at ebb or flood, the dear
 andante dearer than Mozart, than any sound
 except of voices constantly remembered...
 the music sinks to a rustle, and mind returning
 stares from body's eyes at bough and bird,
 at body's home.

Considers the poky sloth:

He dangles topsy-turvy out on a branch
 of this forever Spring, in coat of buff
 and all day chumbling into his umber face.
 He never sees from his green lookout the flowing
 margin of night engulf the Persian slopes
 and the peaks go under like islands going under;
 chumbles by day, slumbers by night, nor chills
 nor thrills to vision time a flooding tide
 careening perpetually to no turn or ebb;

famous weakwit, exists like any beast
in the simple present of no despair nor rapture.

Considers wryly those who could envy sloths!—
the frightened of man, of John and Jean and Juan,
who cry from turrets against the love of man
(the trap, one says, that snapped on Christ), who cry
"Beware the Bandarlog, the flock, Chicago,
live like the stoic eagle!"...sloths are stoic,
no Mardi Gras in their arboreal haunts;
and the frightened of time who dream the dreamless land
of clockless demesnes of dream beyond the glass,
who mourn for blooms and Greeks and morals...the sloth,
requiring time for sleeping, time for feeding,
has time enough, and that is that is that.

But those who laugh at such and brag they grapple
the reins from Marvell's charioteer and drive
at their own pace and pleasure, they live no happier,
sink in no easier final waters of peace:
the badgered Serb still laughs at Diocletian,
who hid his animal ears and killed his barbers
but was undone by a somewhat slyer fellow;
and crazy Lear, rampaging the terrible heath
in a pother of clacking boughs and cracking skies,
he doomed to lightning-bolts the unbending oak,
power imploring power to shatter power—
but Humphrey tittered, and went to bed at noon.
I pity the strong. He is so set about,

so pestered and importuned, how can he sleep?
And if he boggle once: Farewell, and hail!

Considers also, the homesick mind considers
the fidgeting marmosets, the armadillo,
lizards and birds in the morning in the green shadows.
But always too soon the mind gives up, the creatures
fading into the jungle, the jungle fading;
and always a reach of lion-colored dunes
arising blots all Panama from mind,
whelms and is the scene, and a wave spills
and gathers, leans, and spills, and mind knows only
a northward scape and hears a sound of waters,
this land annihilated by distant music,
by the dear andante dearer than any sound
except of voices constantly remembered.

THE SCENE STAY

A Drawing by Diego Rivera

—THE CARIBOU AND THE COBBLER

The boy sits in the street, looking out
in the empty yard on his little twin-footed horse.
There is the road to the village and over the hills
to everywhere, to different living better or worse,
but he turns, murmuring goodbye to his best friend
looking up to his face that is tenderly sad
(he is almost a man), and goodbye to his various brothers,
to the leaping dog, and staring at left and right
and all be it for the first time or the last,
he is a Mexican boy—but that vain and pride
shamed as in a Swedish or any boy at the next
as the hills closed and draped, but one can hide,
however perfectly steady his voice and eye,
the glory of going, the agony of goodbye.

THE BOY GOING AWAY

A Drawing by Diego Rivera

The boy will ride away, but he tarries still
in the swept yard on his little trim-footed horse.
There is the road to the village and over the hill
to someplace, to different living better or worse,
but he tarries, murmuring goodbye to his bent mother
looking up to his face that is tenderly hard
(he is almost a man), and goodbye to his envious brother,
to the leaping dog, and staring at hut and yard
and all as if for the first time or the last.
He is a Mexican boy—but that pain and pride
whelmed up in a Swedish or any boy at the mast
as the hills dimmed and dropped. Not one can hide,
however perfectly steady his voice and eye,
the glory of going, the agony of goodbye.

THE SEMBLANCE OF DEFUNCT

The slain importunate Denmark, stalking the height,
dropping dimly at cock-crow into Hell,
was Quince compared to my living haunt of daylight:
It seems there is no imaginable flesh
between the tight skin and the white skull!
A skeleton thinly bagged, the head being death's!

But he is so spry and affable, why can he so
enslit my eyes and sibilate my breath,
however made in the semblance of defunct?
And why can my steady mind so fashion absurd
light-of-day spooks, a friend...

I know, I know:

Here is the quick affrighting the quick with death.
Too scantily different, too visibly conjunct,
Here is body alive or disinterred.

SMALL TALK

"He loves me, but dreads a life-sentence to jail,
bellowing like the Minotaur," she said,
"amazed, shouldering the stone perplexity
in which true loves are pent; but he shall fail
to break from our private prison till one is dead."
I loathed her classic mouthing of that decree,
her voice was liquid but bitter and too thin.
"Is not the truest love," I softly purred,
hoping my speech no more ridiculous,
"a walling out as well as a walling in—
two lovers within a summer garden, immured
to each from peddlers, checks, the supper bus;
and when they please, opening the gate together?"
Sweetly we deplored the deplorable weather.

THE LIE FROM THE JUNGLE

The days flamed; it seemed the perpetual green
writhed and was hostile; the vultures turned above,
diligent, ominous, patrolling their blue demesne.

True. But his distraught profession of love
was a profanation of friendship. It is a sweet
chatter that even the strictest lovers know,
neatly compounded of honor and fine deceit.
Friendship is honor wholly, or nothing.

So,

being the truest friends, the sudden lie
was palpable and coy, and self-confessed
before her rebuking paragraphs were dry.
And honor, so endangered, was redressed.

The dark monstrous vultures persistantly sailed
their bright regions, but they had not prevailed.

PEDAGOGICAL

You daze your head with a bruit of horns and heralds,
reading the pomp, the campaigns, the Queen of Faerie,
totting the royal wiving and court quarrels;
or tread a blooming meadow, solitary
pupil to scrub-oak and philosopher-cows;
or cluck with codgers the dry rot of fable.
The young, the young, quick and curious, how
are their minds to batten on silly kings and cattle?

We postulated once the constant teacher,
his ease preparatory, his lightest leisure.
I blame only the strictness of your pleasures.
Jaques, good sobersides, they are not wrong
to want your measures less than dancing measures:
they will not always be the immediate young.

LAST VISION

Whom once in cloudy dreams he loved,
 in a clear dream she set above
 her umber curls a lightning-rod
 (like bowsprit over figurehead)
 to catch and ground what she most fears—
 the terrible chain-lightning of ideas.

It tells us. Though we trust it more,
 an utter trust in falsehood.
 Here is a minor landscape: fixed,
 I watched a summer beach in wind,
 but visioned only the white holly
 of a flying dog-fish sun-dappled,
 shadowed the symmetrical breast and tail.

OF BEAUTY TWICE

She fails us. They are false or dreaming

Who brag an intimacy thus,

For thus abstracted she is nothing,

And lips and locks are only foolish.

When I may waltz upon the whitecaps,

Then I shall make my overtures,

But skeptic still and of half hope.

It fails us. Though we trust it more,

An utter trust is folderol.

Here is a minor instance: tired,

I fetched a summer beach to mind,

But visioned only the white belly

Of a flung dog-fish sun-corrupt,

Whereon the greenheads buzzed and fed.

SMALL BALLAD

The ghost ran in
the ghost whirled out
the ghost walked through shut doors clucking and whining
and flew about.

Señor Recuerdo sprang up from the sofa,
neat fellow now dressed in impeccable rage,
and reached for the rifle strung in webs, to kill
a ghost impertinent to middle age.

It was the ghost
of an old wrong
or shame or fiasco, circling there like a stupid
detested song.

Señor Recuerdo fired, and handed
the gun back up to the spiders, and huddled in bed
stark naked in sorrow, suddenly knowing ghosts
are undying, the most living ghost is dead.

LITTLE PORTRAIT

In that room everything waits, waiting for noon,
 the Lord, the mail, a total eclipse or a crime,
 something or anything. There an old buffoon,
 the banjo clock, secretly loses time,

waiting for yesterday. There the bloated divan
 waits for Spring, and the rug waits for the step
 of Dolores, the swarthy magic stranger, to liven
 its tints and heave its Persian blooms with sap.

Everything waits. The shadow waits on the floor
 for night, and the lily waits for day in its pot.
 And the room's tenant waits for a knock on the door,
 that might be Life there knocking, and might not.

IN FIELD OR FLOOD

The wild creatures exist in the simple present,
 a never-blasted Arcady. True, the foxhounds
 gallop the trim talented fox to a kill,
 but think, he is never hounded to thinking of death;
 his foe is actual, children across the river
 bolt up in bed to hear the clear pursuit.
 And Rilke, circling a Duino garden, lamented
 we turn too early or turn too late but never
 of single mind like south-going birds: whirring
 out of our muddle, we suddenly buck the wind,
 and drop to freezing ponds. We know together
 whale rollicking and whale stinking the breeze,
 but in Ngong, among the beautiful hills,
 the lion roams and roars—he is aware,
 in his tawny magnificence, of no frailty.
 I too was jealous, deluded by praise of cheetah
 splendidly bounding, lizard utterly lizard.
 I envied even the probity of snails!

But nonsense, all of this. Tigrillo, little
 Peruvian tiger, the dappled ocelot,
 is not aware his flesh is frail and doomed,
 and I, who lack his jungle grace, foresee
 defunction dead ahead (O timor mortis!)

Yet I can match his bliss of never knowing
with ecstasies of knowing beyond his wit,
and match his born superbities of body
with mental splendors passionately acquired—
his pretty pelt with a maybe insane Van Gogh,
his waiting crouch with the taut flawless tension
of a Yeats poem, his lissom limbs with Mozart;
and I can match his every last perfection.

No scorn, I was envious once; I shall not now
say "Brute creation!" out of the side of my mouth.
I shall praise all living against its opposite,
impartially praising the caribou and the cobbler,
the hill-fighter, the fox on the hill in the morning.

TO THE VICTORY

It dawns once 'tis and truly so
—YO SOY MEJICANO
The fabled story of white-eyes,
their captain lost and every hand,
then tell me, Captain, how shall we
with no sorrow and no pain,
raise land across a wicked sea
in a crude boat, or home perhaps
plumber that lovely tale no longer true
sing from his perch in Flee or Fleeish weather.

TO THE VISIONARY

If ships once trim and trimly manned
lie fathoms under the white-caps,
their captains lost and every hand,
then tell me, Captain, how shall we,
with no sextant and no maps,
raise land across a wicked sea
in a crude boat, or none perhaps;
clamber that lovely isle no lookout ever
sang from his perch in fine or fiendish weather?

LANDSCAPES BY LORCA AND DISNEY

There I saw in that fantastic landscape
the two rivers, one blood and the other tears,
and olive trees fruited with sobs,
and the guitar wailing of arrows without targets.

Elsewhere I saw in a confusion of landscapes
the lumbering precision of the cactus ballet,
a winged burro that smiled like an imbecile,
Baía in Hell's colors, the wicked witless bird.

But I was unable to weep, unable to laugh,
and have thus returned here where laughter
moves living flesh and sobs issue from lips.

Look, joy is right here. Heartbreak is near, listen.

SMALL VOICE FROM THE MUDDLE

Like a spent fugitive, babbling across the fields,
 who hunts the cathedral to cry out "Sanctuary!"
 and startles the farmer's boy with a fierce question,
 you startle me with pleading and fierce questions.
 There is no hideout from what rides you down,
 only the popular hideouts that are no good.
 You ask, and I mention these; but surely you know.

The faraway isle is farthest away. Frau Koerwin
 kissed her spouse, and Ritter his frau, and they sailed
 to Galapagos, to a naked natural life.

(And ho! a tyrannical Baronness packed a pistol,
 she was the world, and paradise was a shambles;
 but there are millions of palmy remote islands.)
 I know...your doctor tethers you in New England.

The church is nearer, it is an easier refuge,
 its pews and blessings are right around the corner.

Ave Maria Santissima, the good Lord—

white and spotlessly white and faultlessly white—
 is right around the corner, waiting for you.

Only to believe is important; without believing,
 the depot, the bank, the poolroom are as safe.

I know...you cannot believe that you can believe.

There is no refuge so near and half so dear

as the private world created in the head—

Arcady, Oz, or a still central sea

wherein you may disport like a lone dolphin.

I know of a crazy painter who capered in tropic

graveyards, dancing at night with a fuego fatuo,

the foolfire quivering over the not-embalmed;

and I saw the dickeybird peer from his silly world

of painted chips and snarls of light. That fellow

lives in the special perpetual bliss of the mad.

I know...you are of sound mind beyond hope.

So here they are, in my rough pentameters, all

impossible, vain, escape is vain, there is none.

The church, the private isle, the secret world

are walled or removed or hid in head but never

proof against life; any living is life.

But maybe there is a happier way to be happy.

As I see it (unless you choose defunction),

square in the midst is the one sanctuary.

The public world is personal there, the sky

is church; and Earth, however you may despair,

is the best and only blessed isle we know,

and always all yours all day all year and always.

FRAGMENTS OF AN IMPOSSIBLE POEM

Here is a Mexico, what I have put together
of a land I have not seen, from books and pictures,
songs and hearsay...an imaginary country
made of pieces ignorantly and fondly.

I hear the proud singer: "Yo soy mejicano..."

"I am Mexican, my land is wild," he sings,

"There is no land lovelier and braver than mine."

I think of Perejetes, the scabby saintly
idiot who painted stars on the floor of his hut
and angels on all four walls. He never said,
"I am going home," he said, "I am going to heaven."
And he excommunicated the village priest.

"My land is wild," the singer cries, but a poet
said, "Suave patria...gentle fatherland...
the fatherland is impeccable and diamantine."

I stare at the mounted caballero, his gallop
set on country pottery quaint and pretty.

(At home I saw the ladies and gentlemen ride
their costly horses, but none of them rode like this.)

The painted horse is crude, the head is too small,
but what a graceful neck, arching, swanlike!

The caballero, his pistols ready, is riding
to fight for the Revolution, for land and liberty.
Whether he gallops to fight for right or wrong,
who can say now, and whether to win a place
on or under that land?...but he is a dashing
caballero, surely the man will fight.

"Naci despreciando la vida y la muerte," the singer
cries..!I was born contemptuous of life and death."
But the Indian huddled in darkness trembles and says,
"When the owl calls from the roof-tree, the Indian dies."

Oh this is impossible, this is absurd!—I know
for sure it is false, distorted, not the actual
honest-to-goodness country or anything like.
But how to know that country? If I go there,
learn the talk, the customs, the larger cities
and the smallest town in the most isolated province,
I know Mexico? I can never know that country,
never know any country to say I know it.

How do I know my own? My Massachusetts?—
a dozen towns, one city. Maine?—one city.
New Hampshire?—two towns. Vermont?—one town, one mountain.
Utah, Rhode Island, Georgia?—nothing, nothing,
words in a book, words and lines on a map.

I think I can only want and try to know
my country, Mexico, any land on earth;
let nothing, no Northern blindness, no Western bias,
keep me from knowing more of anybody.

Yo soy mejicano—I am Turkish Peruvian Russian
Chinese Liberian, my skin is black white brown.
The planet Earth is my home. I like it here,
I have many neighbors. I look to know them better.

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